

God, Freedom, and Evil

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In his discussion of natural theology (arguments to prove the existence of God) and natural atheology (arguments for the falsehood of theistic belief) Plantinga focuses on two of the traditional arguments: the ontological argument as an example of natural theology, and the problem of evil as the most important representative of natural atheology. Accessible to serious general readers.

God, Freedom, and Evil Details

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From Reader Review God, Freedom, and Evil for online ebook

Lee Harmon says

How do I rate a book that will bore most of you but titillate the rest? Half way between two stars and six stars, I guess.

I'm secure in my status as a religion nerd, so I'll admit I loved it. This is an introduction to philosophical apologetics, a short little book that can be read in a couple hours, and understood in five or six hours. Philosophical reflection, Plantinga assures us, is not that different than just thinking hard. It's an excursion into the joy of logic ... for the fun of it, not necessarily to reach any meaningful conclusions. He spends half the book discussing the problem of evil, and the other half on natural theology. Thus half of the book presents a case against God and half attempts to prove he exists. In the second half, Plantinga briefly introduces the Cosmological Argument and the Teleological Argument, and then spends the rest of the book on the Ontological Argument.

Plantinga's argument against the problem of evil is fascinating yet unsatisfying, and his discussion of the ontological argument is equally fun but equally unconvincing ... like one of those puzzles where you know there's something wrong and can't quite place your finger on it.

One note: Do not try to read an electronic version! The constant referring backward to numbered arguments will be very frustrating without a paper copy.

Russell says

Plantinga built a very clever logical argument here, but there are flaws (e.g., certain assumptions about things like free will). But cleverness aside, it's ultimately just a castle without a foundation. By his own admission at the end of the book, nothing in these arguments prove that god exists. Why go to all this trouble defending someone whose very existence completely lacks evidence? Christian reviewers who think this book offers some kind of blow to atheism are just engaging in wishful thinking.

Winston says

The Problem of Evil is an insurmountable one for Christians (and all other theists who believe in a perfectly loving, all-powerful and all-knowing god). There have been intense and motivated efforts over the past two millennia to defend such a position rationally, and they have all failed. Miserably. Utterly. And in many cases, dishonestly.

Some approaches involve invoking an unknown "greater good" defense (which throws god's omnipotence under the bus. An omnipotent deity could simply actualise a desired goal without needing to use suffering as a "middle man"). Attempts to shift the problem by asserting that human happiness is not the goal of life (but knowing god is) removes the omnibenevolence and omnipotence of god (if you love someone, you don't want them to suffer. It really is that simple).

Here, Plantinga takes the old canard of free will. Unfortunately, free will is meaningless unless everyone has an equal amount of it. This is undeniably NOT the case. Not everyone is given the same lifespan, physical strength, mental acuity, political clout, financial resources, and so on. Plantinga is pontificating from the luxurious confines of his residence, funded by conveniently gullible sheep. This has certainly damaged his ability to empathise with the billions who live on less than a dollar each day. And the thousands who starve to death every time the Earth completes a full rotation.

Plantinga also, perhaps unwittingly, advocates a social Darwinism in which the rich and physically powerful are able to murder, rape and steal from weaker individuals (and are therefore less able to exercise their own free will to prevent their own suffering). Plantinga worships a cosmic pedophile who revels in granting freedom to abhorrent individuals while getting his jollies from seeing the most vulnerable suffer and die in agony (only to get thrown into even more torture in the Christian vision of hell).

Lastly, a loving god would take away free will from those who would willingly surrender it in return for a life without suffering. Funnily enough, Plantinga seems to believe in a heaven without suffering but with all the bells and whistles of freedom. So why not create that universe from the get-go and stick with it? Why create a universe with even the possibility of corruption? It certainly is not something a perfect god would do. Then again, a perfect god would not blackmail beings he supposedly loves for eternal worship.

Scott says

Very learned, but a little too analytic for me.

Maryam says

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Armin says

To summarize, according to Plantinga, 1) the problem of evil does not logically contradict the existence of God, and 2) with a modified version of Anselm's ontological reasoning, it seems we cannot prove the existence of God, but at least we can show its logical possibility. So not much for or against either side of the argument, then? I could say: well, I new *that* before! But I think that wouldn't do justice to this book.

What I like about the analytical approach to philosophy of religion is that it's trying to capture in purely logical terms what other philosophers have to describe with many complicated words. Exactly that is also its greatest shortcoming, though, as it necessarily needs to be based on man-made assumptions and man's metaphysical faculty might be just very limited. I thought the very basic argument that evil might exists because overall, it causes even more good, was already quite convincing. The whole possible-world logic and stuff about transworld-depravity and the like, on the other hand, introduces so much room for error that I tend to believe we should have stopped, there. The same goes for the chapter about natural evil, where the same argument, namely that the existence of suffering due to non-moral evil might create more good, afterall, was more convincing than the argument for non-human significantly free beings creating it.

Plantinga's book is still a very interesting read and a good exercise in analytical reasoning, even if you don't accept all of its premises and conclusions, which, I think, you don't have to.

Jacob Aitken says

Plantinga, summarizing his earlier work in *The Nature of Necessity* and *God and Other Minds*, demonstrates that the theist does not face a contradiction in a) asserting God exists and b) evil exists. In this work Plantinga also deals with essences, persons, possible worlds, and logical analysis. While Plantinga uses rigorous logic, this book is well-written and fairly short.

Is There a Logical Contradiction?

If there is a contradiction between the following three premises, the atheist has yet to show it:

God is omnipotent
God is wholly good
Evil exists

We will call this Set {A}. The atheist has to show that one of these propositions' denial or negation contradicts another proposition (Plantinga 13). Even if the atheist cannot show a logical contradiction, Plantinga will go on to argue that he cannot show a logical inconsistency (at least not on these three propositions. By the end of the book all three of these are meticulously refined).

The Free Will Defense (FWD) is the heart of Plantinga's argument. He argues that a person is free with respect to an action, a world containing free creatures is more valuable than a world without it, and to create free creatures capable of moral good is to create them capable of moral evil (29-31).

Plantinga further clarifies classical theism by noting that an omnipotent God cannot create just any world. God can only create logically possible worlds (or rather, God can only actualize logically possible states of affairs). For example, God cannot actualize a state of affairs in which God didn't actualize any state of affairs.

This leads to discussions of Possible Worlds (W). W is a way things could have been. It is an actual state of affairs that obtains. A W is a possible state of affairs, but a possible state of affairs is not necessarily a W (35).

Must Evil Exist?

This is the trickiest part of the book. Plantinga seems to imply "yes" at times (though to be fair that probably isn't his intention). Classical theism has always denied that evil is necessary. Plantinga calls his model "Transworld Depravity:" God cannot create a world in which my essential properties (E) mean I will be free and always do the right thing (48, 52). I think Plantinga is correct but we need to change "always" to "always compelled."

Conclusion:

This is the easiest of Plantinga's books to read. And while the material is simpler, he does clarify points from **The Nature of Necessity*.* My only criticism is the second half on natural theology. His arguments on Evil

and Free Will Defense stand or fall independent of Natural Theology. That section merely restated the material from *God and Other Minds.*

Jason Mccool says

At only 112 pages of normal paperback format, God, Freedom, and Evil is a small book, but still fairly heavy reading. This was my first Plantinga book, but it appears to be a condensing and refocusing of some of his larger works as he points readers in search of fuller explanation to these other works in various footnotes. In that regard, this seemed like a good intro to his works, and a guidepost to future research. Plantinga's goal here is to look at the the "rational acceptability of theistic belief", not attempting to provide a "proof" for God, but rather answering the question, "Is belief in God a reasonable option?" He then divides the book into 2 main parts: "natural atheology" and "natural theology". In the first half on natural atheology, he addresses the so-called "Problem of Evil", while Part 2 addresses - very briefly - Aquinas' cosmological argument and Paley's teleological argument, followed by a more in-depth look at Anselm's ontological argument. Plantinga's style is an interesting mix of rigorous technicality in a conversational tone. Hence, the section on the problem of evil is reminiscent of a Socratic dialogue in its development/objection/refinement/objection cycle. Plantinga uses numbered premises as a shorthand throughout the book, so the reader should be prepared to jump back and forth a little to see which premises he is referencing when he says something like "[14] [15] & [18] necessarily entail [21], which is a self-contradiction. Therefore, this line of reasoning fails. But let's try changing premise [14] to say...." And so he goes through each argument showing why one version fails, then modifying premises to seek out a version that is not logically fallacious while still making its original point. In the end, the problem of evil argument for atheism does not survive Plantinga's analysis. The skeptic may be tempted at this point to say that Plantinga is biased and selective in his analysis, but what I think may surprise many skeptics is the rigor with which Plantinga treats the problem of evil. He takes this objection to God seriously, and goes through it with great thoroughness. This is not the typical shallow throwing about of the issue you might see on the internet, but a very methodical academic examination of it, with a modest conclusion, namely, that "the Free Will Defense, however, shows that the existence of God is compatible, both logically and probabilistically, with the existence of evil; thus it solves the main philosophical problem of evil."

The skeptic might also be surprised that he did not seem to have any qualms about critiquing theistic arguments, as he pointed out flaws in all three classical cosmological, teleological, and ontological arguments. What did disappoint me a little was his brevity on the cosmological and teleological arguments. He criticizes all 3, but stops at the critique of the first 2. He does say in the introduction that he will be focusing on the problem of evil on the atheist side, and the ontological argument on the theist side, but his treatment of the cosmological and teleological arguments may leave the reader with the impression that these are not robust arguments. To spend 8 pages on these 2 lines of reasoning, without answering the objections to them, and then conclude that they are both "unsuccessful" is an unfortunate move on Plantinga's part. That said, his treatment of the ontological argument is actually why I bought this book.

Although a Christian myself, I'd never found Anselm's version of the ontological argument for God very compelling. But William Lane Craig had referenced Plantinga's reformulation of it in his "Reasonable Faith" book, and that really forced me to rethink my hesitancy with this line of reasoning. Published in 1974, Plantinga's treatment of it here is not as polished as it is in later statements of it, but it's nice to see him really walk through the development here. He starts with Anselm's version, looks at objections and addresses them if they seem to misunderstand the actual argument, or adjusts the premises to answer objections. Plantinga's biggest contribution here is probably bringing his "possible worlds" frame of reference that he uses in

answering the problem of evil to bear in fortifying the ontological argument. The ontological argument has always been pretty abstract stuff, so this frame of reference is very helpful, in my opinion, and does improve the argument dramatically. Even so, in the end, Plantinga is respectfully modest in his survey of the argument in his end form of it, as he states, "What I claim for this argument, therefore, is that it establishes, not the truth of theism, but its rational acceptability." And in Plantinga's formulation, the ontological argument does that surprisingly well given the ridicule it has taken over the centuries. He would say, I think, that this is not a case-closer, but a door-opener, in that it removes claims of intellectual objections with which atheists may have tried to "barricade the door" against God, and reveals them to be simply willful rejection rather than carefully reasoned objections as they claim.

Sarbook says

<http://sarbook.com/product/333844>

Del Herman says

This isn't bedtime reading and pushing through 112 pages of theorem after theorem is a lot different than reading CS Lewis or one of the other great Christian thinkers who rely on literate metaphor and a sort of common sense philosophy cushioned under beautiful prose on human nature, the world, etc. That being said though, the theists of the world need people like Alvin Plantinga defending the theist worldview from the very thing its detractors hit it on: logic.

Plantinga does well in explaining the logical inconsistencies in the arguments of those who claim that the existence of evil and suffering precludes the existence of an omnipotent God. (That being said, the problem of evil has never much been a problem for me in terms of my belief in God). As for the theistic arguments, I am less inclined to agree about his dismissal of the cosmological and teleological arguments but I am appreciative of his intellectual honesty in not accepting these simply to prove the existence of God. Plantinga is a true philosopher: he comes in with an empty and open mind to the problem and uses logic to find his solution. For Plantinga (as should be for every philosopher), the arguments do not bend to prove God, God is revealed by virtue of the arguments. I will definitely examine his refutations of Aquinas at a later date (I have always been a fan of the old Prime Mover argument).

Where of course Plantinga is most famous for arguing is in his revision of the Ontological Argument. This is an argument that has been fascinating to me since I first read Anselm's odd, seemingly round-about justification. I had accepted Kant's refutation for a long time but Plantinga here seems to have breathed new life into that 11th Century piece of genius. It's by virtue of that argument alone that this book becomes noteworthy. If ontologically speaking, God is not only a possibility but a certainty through modal logic, it is significant ground for believers.

*For future reference, this is Plantinga's Ontological Argument:

- . Maximal Excellence- A being which possesses omnipotence, omniscience, and moral perfection.
- . Maximal Greatness- A being which possesses these qualities in every possible world.
- . Possible world- A possible version of reality if certain factors in our reality were different.

1. It is possible that a maximally great being exists.
2. If it is possible that a maximally great being exists, then a maximally great being exists in some possible world. (Meaning that a maximally great being can possibly exist in some alternate reality, though alternate realities do not have to exist).
3. If a maximally great being exists in a possible world, then it exists in every possible world.
4. If a maximally great being exists in every possible world, then it exists in the actual world.
5. If a maximally great being exists in the actual world, it must exist.
6. Therefore, a maximally great being exists.

Interesting stuff. The ontological argument is always a slippery one to grasp but I will spend a lot of time pondering the logic of these premises.

David says

This was an excellent book!!! This tiny book took me about a month to read because it says a lot in a very short amount of time. This book is not for the feint hearted as it reads like a philosophy book complete with conditional logical statements. Supposedly this is the "easy" version in comparison to Plantinga's other books. :) But if you are able to spend the time on it you will learn a lot.

This book primarily deals with the following question: "If God is omniscient, omnipotent, and wholly good how can there be evil in this world?" This is the underlying question to many other questions including: "If God exists than how can He let bad things happen to good people?", "If God is all powerful couldn't He have created a world with no evil?", "If God exists than how can He let natural disasters like the Japan tsunami and the earthquake in Haiti kill hundreds of thousands of people?", "Where was God when my daughter died of cancer? What did she do to God?".

A very heavy read, but an interesting one if you get the chance to pick it up. :)

Avel Deleon says

Alvin Plantinga is a first class philosopher. This book analysis the argument of evil, goes through the cosmological argument, teleological argument, and the ontological argument. Alvin begins by assessing anthology(mainly support by the evil "natural" and personal evil" in the world) and corresponding to this theodicy(Perhaps, God has a very good reason, but that reason is too complicated to understand. Or perhaps he has not revealed it for some other reason.) This are unsatisfactory answers. And, Plantinga is well, aware of this his point here is that, even though one doesn't know the reason for the evil, it does not follow that it is irrational to belief in God.

Mackie claims these premises are contradictory

- (1) God is omnipotent

- (2) God is wholly good
- (3) Evil Exist

But, he is well aware that these premises are not enough so he goes on to add "additionally premises" and quasi-logical rules, he says we need them to show the contradiction.

- (4) A good thing always eliminates evil as far as it can
- and
- (5) There is no limits to what an omnipotent being can do.

This is the begging

If you are interested you should read the book. It is a great book. Besides, my friend Christopher! I know, no better philosopher than Plantinga. The ontological argument first written by Anselm is vastly improved and makes a clear cut argument on the logical possibility of God's existence. Logical possibility!!! The cosmological arguments and the teleological arguments are no were as strong but they are quite interesting. Having read through Saint Thomas work on creation, and on God some of the material was repetitive but the book is only 113 pages it well worth the read, for anyone interested in philosophy of religion, or anyone who likes to think hard!!!!

Robert says

Summary of Doctor Strange: Benedict Cumberbatch plays an American who loses everything, gains insight from mindfulness, and then discovers the magic of utilitarianism.

Wyatt Houtz says

disappointing. arminian theodicy

Felipe Barnabé says

Achei muito difícil. Fiquei na dúvida se dava 4 ou 5, mas como cheguei a conclusão que não aproveitei ao máximo por falha minha e não do autor, dei 5.

O autor começa debatendo o problema do mal e mostrando que a existência do mal não é contraditória com a existência de um Deus bom e onipotente. Depois ele segue analisando os argumentos para a existência de Deus(Cosmológico, Teleológico e Ontológico), mostrando suas deficiências e defendendo sua versão do argumento ontológico.
